



Catherine Wister Miles
30" x 36"
c 1797





Samuel Miles

In the Collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art



Catherine Wister Miles

...for his (Stuart's) genius lay in his ability to capture an animated personality rather than mere outward appearances.

From Robin Jaffee Frank

Love and Loss American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures

David McCann 1354 W. Market St Akron Oh 44313 330-864-4930
Catherine Wister Miles

In walking to a time over 200 years ago, and to set the stage for a written defense as to why a particular artist painted a portrait requires the assistance of libraries.

I would like to thank the Akron, Ohio - Akron-Summit County Public Library for providing the resources, and for having an interlibrary loan service.

The College of Wooster (Ohio), Corcoran Museum of Art and Ms. Marianne Henein (Washington DC), Cuyahoga Community College (Cleveland Ohio), Walsh College (Canton, Ohio), Toledo, Ohio Public Library, The University of Akron (Ohio) and the University of Akron's Roger Durbin, PhD, Kent State University (Ohio), the Kenyon College Library (Gambier, Ohio), The Library of Congress, the American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), Samford University (Birmingham, Alabama) the Houston, Texas San Jacinto, Museum, Raymond Hershey and photographer Mark Holaday were very kind in their providing assistance and resource materials.

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... for nothing short of omniscience could certify at this late day to some of the problems confronting the compiler. When a Stuart portrait comes to us to-day as it left the artist, without being “retouched” or “restored,” we can pass upon its authenticity with a comfortable degree of certainty, although the portraits were hardly ever signed, and frequently there is little contemporary documentary evidence to go by, the artist’s masterly and characteristic manner of work telling its own story.

Fielding Mantle from his article “Paintings by Gilbert Stuart not mentioned in Mason’s (George C.) Life of Stuart.”

Catherine Wister Miles. Why do I believe Gilbert Stuart painted a portrait of her?

Over thirty years ago the portrait caught my imagination. I had just graduated from high school in 1973 when the portrait had been given to my father Donald Miles McCann by his father Donald Miles McCann.

I looked into the stern eyes of this lady and wondered – who did this extraordinary work?

Extensive resource materials not yet being available on something to be called the Internet, I was left to my wonderings.

Some thirty years later, in 2004, as a result of finding the one and only record of her life found in a letter Mrs. Miles wrote to David Rittenhouse,¹ I became reenergized to find the artist – particularly as the Internet provided an opening to the world. And with a much expanded family history resource center at the Akron Summit County Library I set to work.

My grandfather, Donald Miles McCann was born in Zanesville, Ohio.

¹ American Philosophical Society, 2005. <http://www.amphilsoc.org> (Noted astronomer and the first director of the United States Mint, David Rittenhouse was still residing in Philadelphia during the British occupation when Mrs. Miles wrote him a heartwarming note asking his assistance to ensure British soldiers would not occupy the Miles’ house. Samuel Miles was an officer in the service of the Continental Army, and a prisoner of war in New York City.)

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His grandmother, Mary Ingles Miles married the recent émigré, from County Down, Ireland, John McCann on March 6, 1865.

Mrs. Mary Miles McCann was the great-granddaughter of Catherine Wister Miles.

Now as to her receiving the portrait of her great-grandmother Catherine Wister Miles? A fire at the Milesburg, Pennsylvania mansion built by Joseph Green set the portraits of Samuel Miles and Catherine Miles on differing paths across the country.²

Miss Elizabeth F. McKean (her great grandfather Joseph – son of Governor Thomas McKean - married Hannah Miles – daughter of Samuel and Catherine Wister Miles)³ received the portrait of Samuel Miles painted by Gilbert Stuart and she subsequently donated the portrait to the Smithsonian Institute. The portrait is now part of the collection of the Washington D.C. Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Mrs. John McCann received the portrait of her great grandmother Catherine Wister Miles. And it would not be until 1973 that the soot from the house fire would be removed as the portrait was cleaned by the Esselburn Studios of Akron, Ohio.

² Samuel Miles son-in law, Joseph Green assisted in the creation of the Milesburg, Pennsylvania based ironworks. See *Notes and Queries Historical Biographical and Genealogical Relating Chiefly to Interior Pennsylvania*, ed. William Henry Egle, MD., MA, Annual Volume 1898 (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1970) 146.

³ (Writer's Note – Joseph McKean's half-sister – Sarah McKean, Marquesa de Casa Yrujo would have her portrait completed by Gilbert Stuart)

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Samuel Miles was an accomplished soldier both in the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War. He served as a colonel with distinguished service in the New York campaign in 1776. Unfortunately, as a result of that action, he was taken prisoner by the British.

He would go on to serve honorably as Mayor of Philadelphia; as a trustee to the University of Pennsylvania; a "faithless" presidential elector – rocking the boat in 1796 when pledged to John Adams, he voted for Thomas Jefferson; and as a founder of Milesburg, Pennsylvania.

December 29, 2005 marked the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Samuel Miles death.

Mrs. Catherine Wister Miles, had much to claim to her heritage. The Wister/Wistars of Philadelphia were renowned for their achievements. Her parents were Quakers.^{4 5}

Mrs. Miles (1742-1797) was a Quaker.

Having said that, the look at the portrait would provide ample testimony to her religious beliefs. And her obituary, one of the select few published in the Saturday, October 28, 1797 edition of *The Philadelphia Gazette & Universal Daily Advertiser*, provided yet another view of this special humble woman.

On the 24th of this month at Cheltenham, Mrs. Catherine Miles, the wife of col. Samuel Miles – Of this excellent woman it may be truly said that she fulfilled all the duties of a wife, mother, mistress and friend, as one that was to give an account hereafter of her conduct. She was beloved in life and died lamented by all who knew her.

⁴ William Wade Hinshaw, *Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy*, Volume 2 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1938), 438.

⁵ Kenneth Scott, *Genealogical Data from The Pennsylvania Chronicle 1767-1774* (Washington: National Genealogical Society, 1971) 81.

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In her attire, she is plainly dressed in black, with a white apron, and she appears as a stern and serious minded woman. In speaking of her attire, is worthy to note a comment offered about the dress of the Friends (Quakers) during the days before and just after the Revolution.

“In time, white aprons were disused by the gentry, and then the Friends left off their coloured ones and used the white!”⁶

Then there is contrasting the miniature of Martha Washington and her clothing, particularly the bonnet and the bonnet of Mrs. Miles.⁷

In looking at the portrait, one looks at the magnificence of her facial features. She is not pretty, but the artist who accomplished this work was noted for focusing exclusively on the face. It was John Neal who characterized Stuart’s portraits of women as “creatures of flesh and blood... somewhat *too strongly individualized perhaps for female portraiture.*”⁸(emphasis added) And this is Mrs. Catherine Wister Miles.

It was Gilbert Stuart who “varied his response to the subject, the evocation of inner being, often in the form of an expression of either momentary or **steadied –gaze** (emphasis added) interaction with the viewer, was generally characteristic of his work”⁹

⁶ John Watson, **Annals of Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania, in the Olden Time, I.** (Philadelphia: Edwin S. Stuart, 1899), 189.

⁷ Robin Jaffee Frank, **Love and Loss American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures.** New Haven: Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000.

⁸ Dorinda Evans, **The Genius of Gilbert Stuart** (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 75.

⁹ Ibid, 79.

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On her bonnet appear glasses.¹⁰ This is significant. These were custom made sliding glasses.¹¹ And given Mrs. Miles' friendship with David Rittenhouse – who “made common glasses”¹² – what is to be derived?

Research shows the great cost for purchasing eye wear during the late 18th Century. Mrs. Miles was a lady of means.

Carried further, how many women had their portraits completed with eyewear as part of the portraiture?¹³

To my dismay, there are no books that focus exclusively about women in portraiture who wear glasses.¹⁴

¹⁰ Old Mrs. Shoemaker, who died in 1825 at the age of 95, said that she had lived many years in Philadelphia before she saw temple spectacles – a name then given as a new discovery. Watson, 193.

¹¹ www.eyeglasseswarehouse.com/raresliders.html
www.english.interoptika.ru/optics/history/european

¹² Brooke Hindle, **David Rittenhouse**, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), 84.

¹³ In Frances Borzello's book *Seeing Ourselves - Women's Self-Portraits*, there are two 18th Century women who portray themselves as they really are – artist Anna Dorothea Therbusch. In commenting on this self-portrait, Ms. Borzello writes “A portrayal, *rare at this time* (emphasis added), by a woman artist of herself as she really is – short sighted and well into middle age.” Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves – Women's Self Portraits*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 73.

And there sits Anna Dorothea Therbusch wearing her eyepiece. In commenting on her beauty, the *Correspondance Littéraire* “carried this immortal sentence: “One thing I know, is that on receiving Mme. Therbusch, the Academy cannot be suspected of having submitted to the role of beauty, so powerful in France, for the new academician is neither very young nor very pretty.””, Borzello, 72.

There is the self portrait of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. In all her humanness, “it was acceptable for a male artist to represent himself in so unvarnished a manner, *but women artists would rarely dare to do so.*” (emphasis added), Borzello, 71.

¹⁴ In reviewing the hundreds of portraits featured in **The Dictionary of American Portraits**, not one woman, from the late 18th and early 19th century who is portrayed, is shown wearing glasses. **Dictionary of American Portraits**, eds. Hayward Circker, and Blanche Circker (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1968).

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A Gilbert Stuart portrait of Edward Penington is illustrative of eyeglasses worn by people of the era. Having him portrayed with his eyeglasses sheds great insight to the character of the man.

Gilbert Stuart was noted as paying strict attention to the facial features of those who portraits he completed.

Additionally, and more significantly, this is a panel painting on a very smooth surface that was grained to produce Stuart's signature twill canvass effect. (Please see texture samples at the end of the commentary)

By his own account, Mr. Stuart spent little time on the surroundings of the figure. It was the face- the face!¹⁵ Especially the nose!¹⁶ But where he performs his miracles of accoutrement, the white on Mrs. Miles' shawl is in keeping with white flourishes found on other portraits.

This is an unsigned portrait – except perhaps, under magnification, a small blot appears over Mrs. Miles' right eye. With closer detection, distinctive “S”'s are evident on three folds of her bonnet. (Compare the printed “S” as he signed his name – and the “S” in her bonnet and the link unfolds).

¹⁵ In Stuart's portraits of men (*writer's note – and I would insert women, as well!*) one is first struck by the vigorous personality of the subjects, and the strength and virility of the painting, in which he shows so much of the individuality and humanity of his models, these being translated to our consciousness by subtle lines of lovely color. These portraits are supremely artistic, because, with apparently slight means, they convey so strong an impression of social refinement and distinction, of real men and women conversing with us.” from Fielding Mantle *Paintings by Gilbert Stuart Not Mentioned in Mason's Life of Stuart*, 311.

¹⁶ “It is remembered by many that Stuart generally produced a likeness on the pannel (sic) or canvas, before painting in the eyes, his theory being, *that on the nose (emphasis added)*, more than any other feature, likeness depended.” William Dunlap, *The Arts of Design in the United States*. 1. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 212.

“ Stuart, before drawing a portrait, observed which side of the face gave the best outline of the nose, and chose that as the side nearest the spectator's eye.” When commenting on the importance of the nose to a portrait he was quoted as saying, after “putting his thumb under his large and flexible proboscis, and turning it up, so as to display the ample nostrils, he would exclaim, “ Who would know my portrait with such a nose as this?” ”, Dunlap, 218.

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Mrs. Catherine Wister Miles father, John, and his brother Caspar Wistar, established lucrative businesses for themselves and for generations of the family in and around Philadelphia.

In 1744, John Wister, Catherine Wister Miles' father, built a home in Germantown, affectionately called Grumblethorpe. It is located at No. 5261 Main Street and was the summer residence of the Wister family.¹⁷ Grumblethorpe served as a refuge for the Quaker family during the Revolutionary War, but also site of the death of Revolutionary War hero General Samuel Agnew. It was here that Catherine Wister Miles' father would live, and her brother John. And it was here where teenager Sally Wister would pen her journal that would be famous as "Sally Wister's Journal". To show the connections her father and husband had - her father and her husband, General Miles, received a sight draft of £500 from Revolutionary War financier Robert Morris.¹⁸

Gilbert Stuart would begin his lively and lucrative career as a Philadelphia artisan of the nation's powerful. But his stay in Philadelphia would be short-lived. In 1796, entering into Germantown was the artist Gilbert Stuart, who because of the smallpox epidemic¹⁹ or because of a nervous condition²⁰, or because of so many Philadelphians wanting to gain an audience with the artist ²¹, sought refuge in the quiet upscale community of Germantown.

¹⁷ Charles Francis Jenkins, *Washington in Germantown* (Philadelphia: William J. Campbell, 1905), 37.

¹⁸ http://www.sanjancinto-museum.org/Hertstein_Library/Manuscripts/Finding_Aids/Flanagan

¹⁹ Carrie Rebora Barratt, and Ellen G. Miles, *Gilbert Stuart*. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004) 131.

²⁰ James Thomas Flexner, *On Desperate Seas A Biography of Gilbert Stuart* (New York: Knopf Publishing, 1955) 138.

²¹ Jenkins, 301.

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It was in Germantown, among his many artistic activities, he “often stopped at the stoop of the old Wister house, some doors above, to chat with the merry company that would gather there.”²²

It was in Germantown studio the leaders of this nation would sit while Gilbert Stuart completed their portraits.

Samuel Miles was one.

His portrait is documented.

But his Quaker wife?

No account. No record.

Was it a Quaker’s last wish, before she died in 1797, that no account is made of this portrait lest she break the basic tent of being Quaker – humbleness?²³

It is time to give this humble woman her due. She gave birth to fifteen children. Ten would reach adulthood.

In her quiet steadfast Quaker way, she raised a family during wartime, and aided her patriot husband.

And in the studio adjacent to her late father’s home (which was inhabited by Catherine Miles’ brother) she and her husband Samuel would sit and have their images portrayed by the master of American portraiture.

²² Jenkins, 309.

²³ Benjamin S. Beck, “A Witness Faithful Lasting True – The Impact of Photography on Quaker Attitudes to Portraiture.” Master’s Thesis <http://www.webukonline.co.uk/benjamin_beck/>

And the portrait which portrays her spirit, as caught by Gilbert Stuart, is truly remarkable.

As he himself said – he never signed a portrait as he let the brush strokes speak for themselves.

Gilbert used “flesh color (that) could convey messages about the sitter’s health and age – and Stuart did sometimes use color this way – but beauty and virtue were so intertwined that the unusual freshness and transparency of his skin colors (their “purity”) inevitably conveyed a message of *moral health and worth* (emphasis added)”²⁴ And the real picture is what Stuart portrayed.

Consider Mrs. Richard Yates recommendation that she “wanted to see themselves as they really were, and were perfectly willing that an artist should make technical experiments if these led to a more accurate portrayal.”²⁵ So Stuart “partook of all colors, not mixed, so as to be combined in one tint, but shining through each other like the blood through the natural skin.”²⁶

And while Stuart’s portraiture differed in many ways, by her own account, Professor Dorinda Evans wrote that given Stuart’s mental state of mind “they (Stuart’s portraits) can be remarkably uneven”²⁷

And there is Catherine Wister Miles. An exacting portrait. Look at her. Compare it. And see, that in his tradition, Gilbert Stuart caught the essence of a bespectacled, stern, moral, and humble Quaker lady.

²⁴ Evans, 79-80.

²⁵ John Walker, **National Gallery of Art**, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1984), 380.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Evans, Dorinda, “Gilbert Stuart and Manic Depression,” **American Art**, 18, Number 1 (Spring 2004), 11.

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http://www.worcesterart.org/Collection/Early_American/

Please notice the detail of the glasses +/- texture /twill effect of the painting
(Left click your mouse – as if to copy the sample – the sample becomes blue - and the texture is more evident)





Notice the textured result & twill effect





Notice twill effect on the portrait of Catherine Wister Miles

On the next page is the twill effect on the portrait of Samuel Miles

“As is well known, Stuart availed himself of every advantage offered by the surface upon which he painted. The portrait of Samuel Miles is done upon a wooden panel, which has been carefully grained with a tool to resemble English twill can-vas – a characteristic trick of the painter, and one that often figures in the identification of doubtful portraits.”

From *Art Treasures of Washington – Early Portrait Painters*

<http://www.oldandsold.com/articles34/art-treasures-7.shtml>



Samuel Miles

In the Collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art

(Twill effect)



Jane Stuart reported that her father's cabinetmaker cut teeth in a plane-iron and dragged it backward, which proved “the best way of indenting without tearing the wood.” Supposedly, Stuart's panel *Mrs. James Swan* was textured in this manner. An x-radiograph detail ([fig. 5](#)) reveals the satisfactory work of the toothed plane. The lines are on the diagonal only from lower left to upper right and were made by a narrow tool at somewhat irregularly spaced intervals. Conservators at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, thought the same tool was used to score Christiana Swan's yellow poplar copy, as the angle and spacing of lines are identical to that of the Stuart ([De Lorme 1976](#)). In other Stuart panels, the first series of lines made by the serrated tool is crossed by a second series.

From – Marcia Goldberg, “Textured Panels in 19th Century American Painting.” **Journal of the American Institute for Conservation**. 32, 1 Article 4, 33-42, 1993.
<http://aic.stanford.edu/jaic/articles/jaic32-01-004.html>



Fig. 5. Detail, x-radiograph, Gilbert Stuart, *Mrs. James Swan*, ca. 1808. Oil on panel, 32½ × 26½ in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Swan Collection, Bequest of Elizabeth Howard Bartol. X-radiograph courtesy Research Laboratory, Museum of Fine Arts

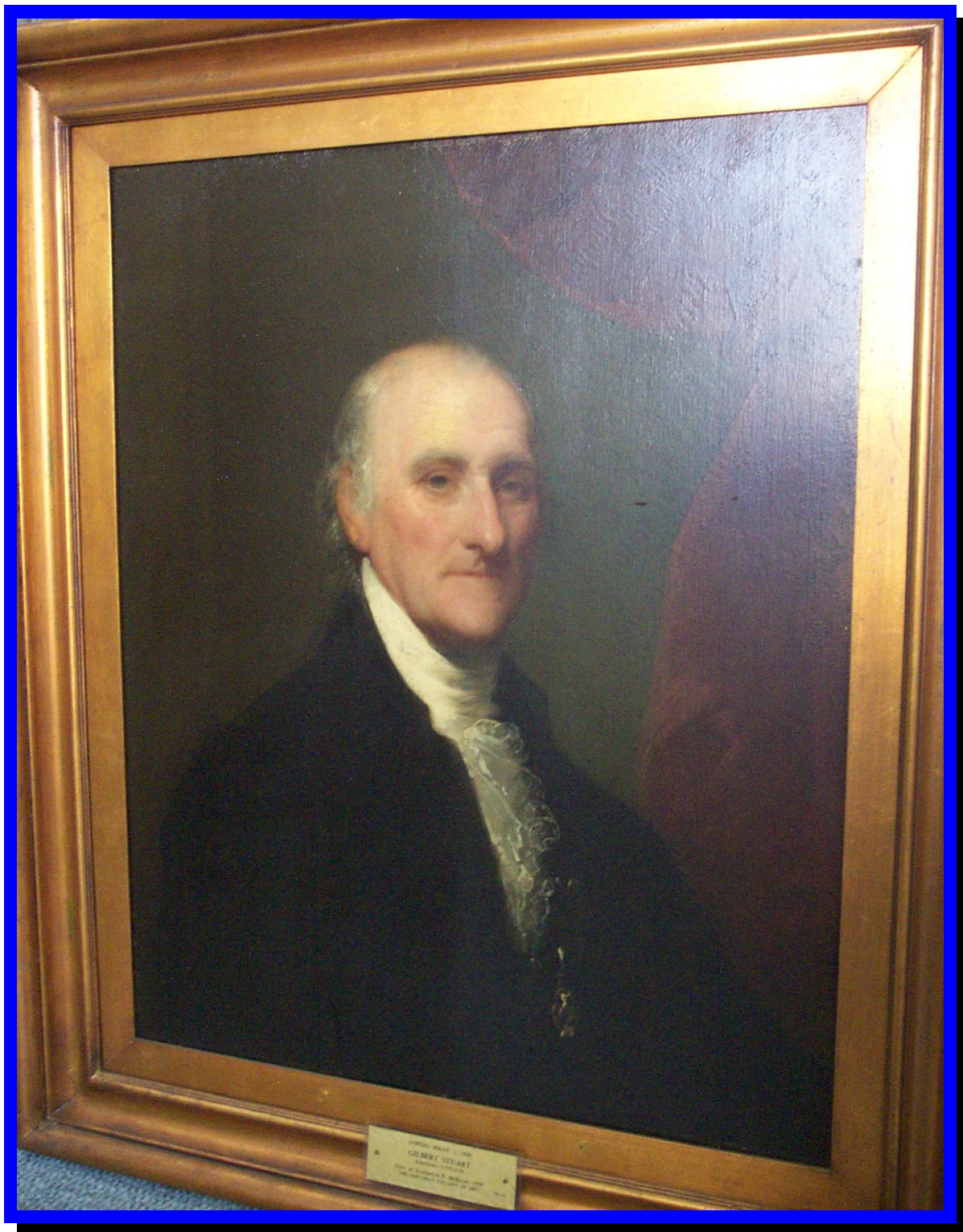
From – Marcia Goldberg, “Textured Panels in 19th Century American Painting.” **Journal of the American Institute for Conservation**. 32, 1 Article 4, 33-42.

<http://aic.stanford.edu/jaic/articles/jaic32-01-004.html>

Twill effect



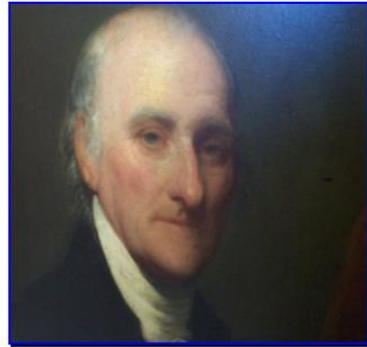




Samuel Miles
In the Collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art



Catherine Walter Miles
30" x 26"
c. 1797



Samuel Miles
In the Collection of the Governor's Gallery of Art

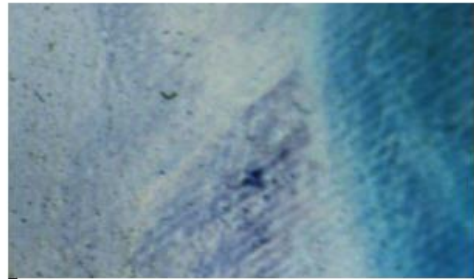
Please notice the detail of the glasses - texture (full effect of the painting)
(Left click your mouse - as if to copy the sample - the sample becomes blue - and the texture is more evident)



Notice the textured wash & full effect



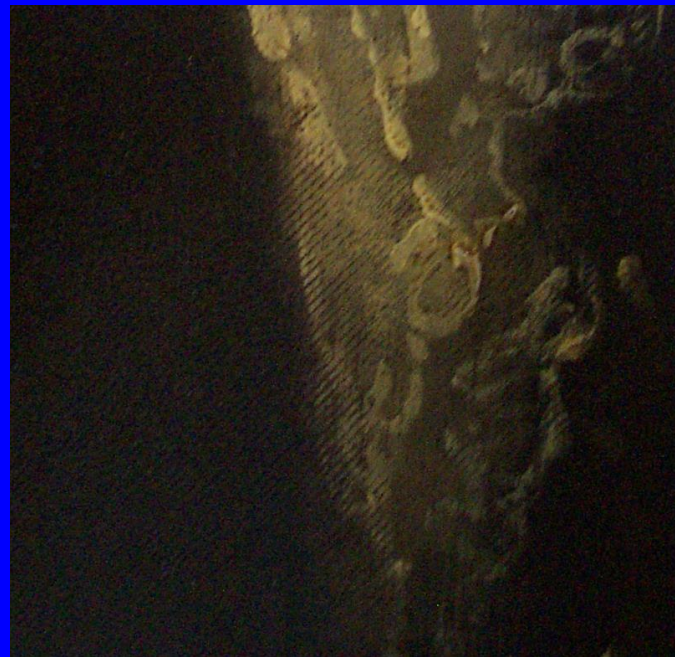
Please notice the detail of the glasses + texture /twill effect of the painting
(Left click your mouse – as if to copy the sample – the sample becomes blue - and the texture is more evident)



Samuel Miles
In the Collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art

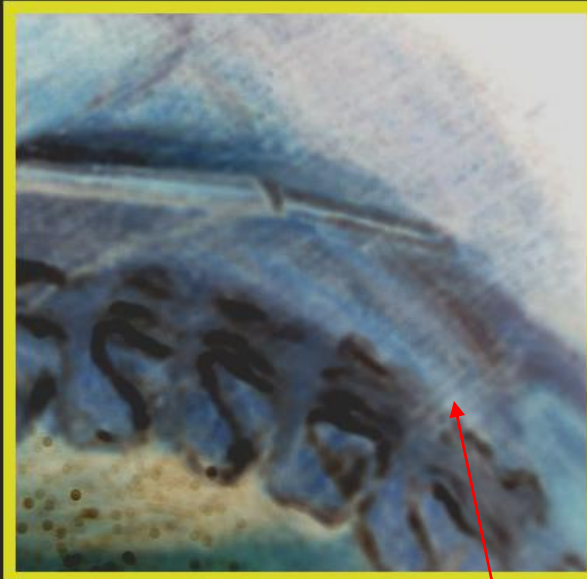


Catherine Wister Miles

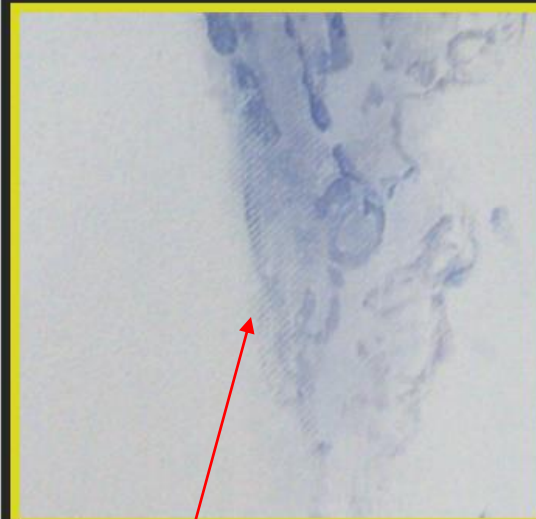


Samuel Miles

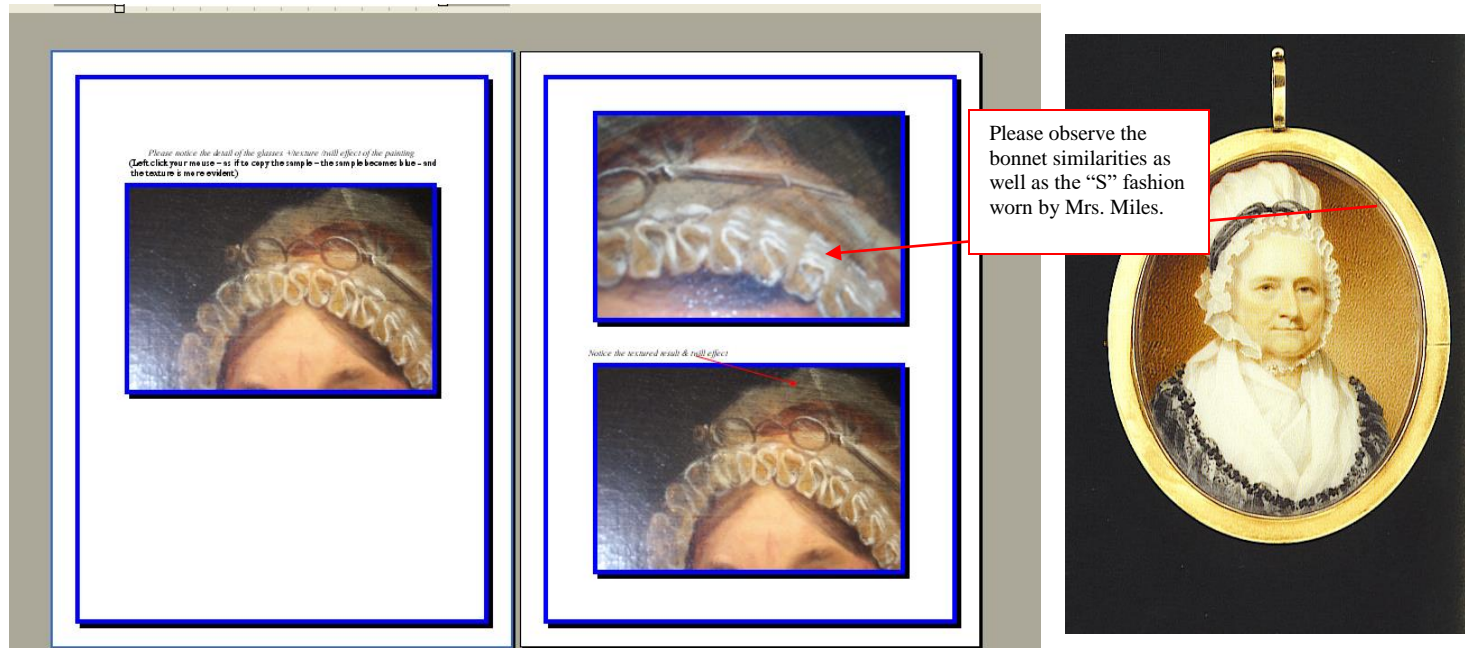
In the Collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art



Catherine Wister Miles



Samuel Miles

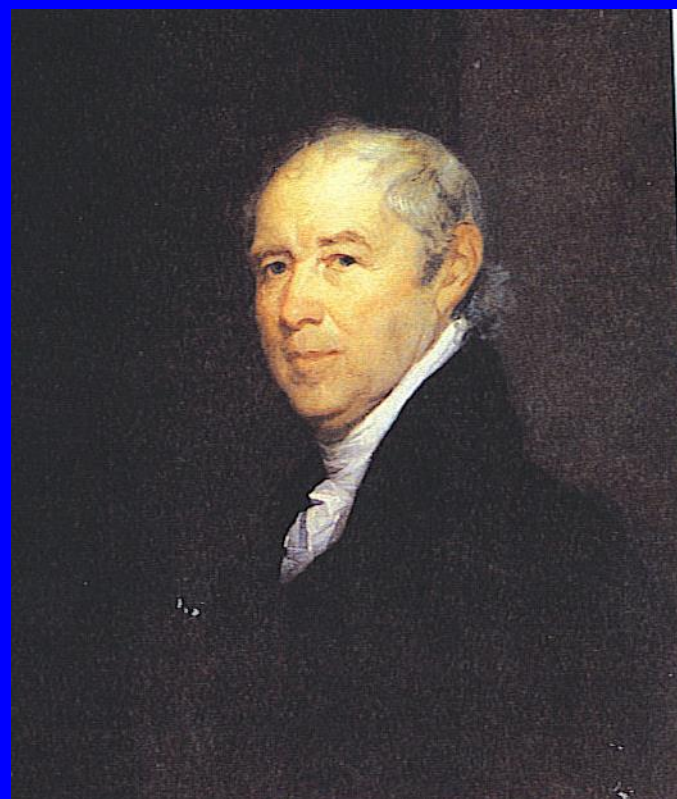


Robert Field's *Martha Washington* from
Robin Jaffee Frank's

**Love and Loss American Portrait
and Mourning Miniatures**



Catherine Wister Miles



Benjamin Tappan from
John Walker's Gallery of Art Washington
New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1984

